

CAPITAL CITY AIRPORT

(Capital City Airport, Francis Aviation)

North Side of Grand River Avenue

Lansing, Vicinity

Clinton County

Michigan

HAER No. MI-320-B

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Northeast Field Area

Chesapeake/Allegheny System Support Office

National Park Service

U.S. Custom House

200 Chestnut Street

Philadelphia, PA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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CAPITAL CITY AIRPORT, Francis Aviation

HAER No. MI-320-B

Location: Capital City Airport, West Ramp Area
Lansing vicinity, Clinton County, Michigan

UTM: 16.696210.4738500
Quad: Lansing North, 1:24,000

Date of Construction: 1929, 1936 (assumed), 1942 (assumed), 1948

Engineer: State of Michigan, Board of Aeronautics
Architect: None

Present Owner: Capital Region Airport Authority
Capital City Airport
Lansing, Michigan

Present Occupants: Vacant

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Francis Aviation buildings are significant for two reasons, the first being that one of the hangars in the complex is the second oldest hangar erected at the Capital City Airport, after the Club Hangar. The second reason is that all of the buildings played a role in the training of pilots during World War II under the Civilian Pilots Training Program. Future commercial pilots enrolled in the program to receive ground and flight training at the Capital City Airport, before being transferred elsewhere for solo and advanced flight training. This training was also provided by Hughes Flying Service in the adjacent buildings.

Project Information: The Francis Aviation buildings are identified airport hazards under Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) standards, and are scheduled for removal. During an environmental review (1988), the State Historic Preservation Officer determined that the buildings meet the criteria for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places and, therefore, would require mitigation of the adverse effect caused by their removal. The Memorandum of Agreement (1995) stipulates documentation of the Francis Aviation buildings according to HAER guidelines. This documentation was undertaken to fulfill that stipulation.

Ilene R. Tyler, AIA
QUINN EVANS/ARCHITECTS
219 1/2 North Main Street
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Refer to the Overview Report MI-320 for a more complete description of aviation and its ties to the Lansing area. Establishment of fixed base operators at the Capital City Airport is covered more fully in the narrative text of the Overview Report. The documentation of this individual element provides a more specific history of the Francis Aviation buildings in the context of the Capital City Airport.

The Francis Aviation complex took shape over a number of years with a variety of owners and companies. Development of the site began with Foster Airways in the 1920s. The company, which later became the core of the Francis Aviation complex, was headed by J.D. Foster who, in 1928, began construction of his company's 60 x 120 foot steel hangar, at Capital City Airport. The 16-foot-high hangar, which was completed no later than 1929, consists of a concrete floor, and corrugated metal walls and roof, and contains approximately 7,200 square feet. The roof has an elliptical shape and is supported by clear span steel trusses.

In addition to housing the planes operated by Foster Airways, the hangar also provided additional hangar space for visiting planes needing emergency repairs, an office, and a repair and service shop (Lansing Airport News 1928). By 1929, three private fixed base operators had erected airplane hangars south of the Cluh Hangar, in the following order: Foster Airways, SKF Air Service, Inc., and Wolverine Flying Service, Ltd.

From approximately 1934 to 1936, Harvey Hughes operated his own flight school out of the Foster Hangar, having returned to Lansing after several years of barnstorming. He used the Foster Hangar until 1936 when he leased, and later bought, the SKF Hangar. Lieutenant Arthur J. Davis, for years one of Lansing's early leading commercial flyers, then bought the Foster Hangar in the late 1930s. Davis had already established a business in 1922 called Michigan Airways, Inc. that was based at his own field near East Lansing, now the site of the Cheney Cement plant. For a period of two or three years Davis also operated out of the Foster Hangar at the Capital City Airport. (Davis Airport on Abbot Road in East Lansing is named after this famous local early flyer.) While at Capital City Airport, he constructed a one-story office and shop with storage for parts, then added a tin clad hangar with a round roof (Patterson 1992). It is believed that the structure immediately west of the current office building that has a north-south orientation is Davis' hangar. Davis sold to Gerry Francis in the early 1940s to concentrate on his stunt flying business, the Art Davis Air Show or "Flying Circus". Except for Francis, none of the early fixed base operators made money from their airport-based businesses (Ruth 1992).

Gerry Francis had already been operating a flight school in Flint, Michigan, when Art Davis sold Francis his business in 1942. A few years later, Francis added two tin clad hangers with gable roofs to the Foster/Davis complex. All of these original structures exist today in their original location, never having been relocated or damaged by fire. They are, however, concealed behind a false front of aluminum siding, except the metal storage hangar which retains its own facade.

The hangar built immediately south of the Foster Hangar, which also had an east-west orientation, was constructed in the latter part of 1948. This structure was a surplus building, otherwise known as a Butler Building, that Francis had bought unassembled. The hangar has corrugated metal panels that are bolted together, and run from the ground up to the eaves to form the sides of the structure. Additions were made to the gable trusses, and the roof extended, to create a single gable roof. The hangar was used to store aircraft and aircraft parts (Gibbs 1995). The other hangar, known as the "metal storage hangar" was constructed some time prior to 1949 and was used to store aircraft parts and

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pieces. It is located immediately west of what is believed to be the Davis hangar, and also has a north-south orientation. It is a surplus or Butler Building as well (Gibbs 1995).

Between the Foster hangar and the 1948 hangar south of it, there is a small wood building that is apparently one of the original structures built at Capital City Airport (Gibbs 1995). It is virtually impossible to ascertain that the building is there because it is concealed by a continuous false front that spans the length of the complex, and it is sandwiched in between the two hangars with no visible gaps to help define the structure. It is believed that this structure was the original building used by Babe Weyant Ruth and her family as their five cent pie and pop concession stand in 1934, which, according to Babe, was located at the southeast corner of the Foster Hangar (Ruth 1992). (Refer to the Overview Report MI-320 for a more thorough discussion of Babe Weyant Ruth and her association with the airport.)

A business parallel to Francis Aviation was Hughes Flying Service. Both businesses were contracted to provide ground and dual-flight training as part of the Civilian Pilots Training Program, which was implemented near the beginning of World War II to train three hundred pilots per month prior to their employment in commercial aviation. Other federal programs, such as the War Training Service, provided flight training for military pilots. Three weeks of classroom instruction were provided on the campus of Michigan State College, then their training was continued at the Capital City Airport. Hughes and Francis each trained one hundred and fifty pilots per month, and provided one additional week of classroom instruction, followed by 10 hours of dual-control flying time. Refer to the Overview Report MI-320 for an additional description of the instruction program. People who received training in the CPTP went on to military service or commercial aviation.

After the war, the two aviation services continued to provide flight instruction for the private sector. However, Francis relocated to modern facilities that he built near the new terminal. Sometime before 1962, Lansing Community College leased the Foster/Davis/Francis Aviation complex until it, too, relocated to new facilities near the new terminal in 1974. Between 1974 and 1978, it is understood that there were various owners of the Francis Aviation complex, including Design and Build Construction Company (Gibbs 1995).

In 1978, White Star Photography, an aerial photography company and fixed base aircraft operator, purchased the Francis Aviation complex. The only significant change that White Star made to the complex was in 1979 when the company remodeled Art Davis' original one-story office building, built in the late 1930s, into a 2-story office building. According to an appraisal done of the complex on July 31, 1990 by the Blandford Appraisal Company, "tenant space occup[ied] approximately 3,500 square feet on the upper level, a portion of [which was] used for chemical storage" for the film-development process which was situated on the first floor. The office building as a whole is a "combination of block, metal and wood frame construction containing a total of 8,040 square feet. The [first] floor is divided into many small rooms, some of [which were] used as offices. Others [were] used as film-processing rooms, a fireproof storage vault, and restrooms" (Blandford and Sidor 1990, 12).

White Star utilized all of the buildings that comprised the Foster/Davis/Francis Aviation complex which, according to the July 31, 1990 appraisal of the complex by Blandford Appraisal Company, consisted of a 2-story office building measuring 60' x 67', a metal storage building measuring 60' x 40', a hangar measuring 60' x 120', a second small office measuring 10' x 20', and a second hangar measuring 40' x 120'. In December of 1991 White Star vacated the complex after selling it to the Capital Region

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Airport Authority for airport expansion and for compliance with FAA regulations requiring a wider clear zone associated with the runways.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. ENGINEERING DRAWINGS

No drawings were found for the Francis Aviation complex.

B. HISTORIC VIEWS

Foster and SKF Hangars. (1929). Lansing, Michigan. Private collection of Babe Weyant Ruth. The small rectangular shed in the foreground is the outhouse toilets.

Foster Hanger. (1934). Lansing, Michigan. Private collection of Babe Weyant Ruth. The small structure at the south end of the hangar is the food concession stand. The office wing is a stucco finished frame structure.

C. INTERVIEWS

Gibbs, Darwin. Telephone interview with the author. 6 June 1995. Darwin's association with the Capital City Airport was that he worked for Francis Aviation during the 1940s, and later for Hughes Flying Service and Lansing Community College.

Patterson, Ned. Interview with the author. Lansing, Michigan, 9 April and 7 May 1992. Ned's association with the Capital City Airport was as an employee of the Michigan Board of Aeronautics from 1940 until his retirement in 1986.

Ruth, Babe Weyant. Interview with the author. Lansing, Michigan, 7 May 1992. Babe's association with the Capital City Airport was as an aviator, flight instructor, and unofficial historian of the airport from the early 1930's until the present (1992).

D. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blandford, T.M., and Sidor, E.J. July 31, 1990. Appraisal of 16641 Airport Road, Capital City Airport, Lansing, Michigan, "White Star Services." Grand Rapids, Michigan. The original appraisal is available at the Capital Region Airport Authority offices.

Lansing Airport News: Airport Dedication Number. June, 1928. Making History: 5-6; Lansing's Airmen: 7; Aero Club of Lansing Inc.: 8; A New Lansing Industry: 9, 33; Airport Government: 13; Aerial Photography: 17, 35; Local Airways Firm Starts Second Year of Operation; Michigan, Lansing and Air Mail; Michigan State Police and Aviation: 12, 2; New Air Service Firm Organized in Lansing. A photocopy of the original program is in the collection of Babe Weyant Ruth. There are no known additional copies.